Commencement Address
The Ohio State University
Thursday, September 3, 1987
Marilyn Robinson Waldman

Dr. Jennings, Dr. Brand, honored guests, colleagues, friends, relatives, and graduates. Thank you for honoring me with your attention today and for allowing me to represent the faculty at The Ohio State University. Most of you must know that our president, Dr. Edward H. Jennings, is a man of many distinctions; but perhaps you were not aware that once a year, at the end of the summer, he proves himself to be a master of the contradiction-in-terms: he invites a faculty member to speak for only fifteen minutes.

Programmed to the forty-eight-minute presentation as I am, I have been forced by Dr. Jennings' invitation to think very hard about what is uppermost in my mind as I witness your graduation, which is itself evidence of our participation in perhaps the boldest educational venture in human history--the attempt to offer higher education to such large numbers (58% of the age group this coming year); to try to achieve large-scale individual and collective distinction in order to further our pursuit of a just and egalitarian society.

A commencement at one of the largest public institutions in North America is a particularly powerful reminder of those goals and an invitation to rededicate ourselves to using our education to foster public wisdom, the good of the whole, and, indeed, all of the highest ideals of our society. As the daughter of World War I immigrants from Eastern Europe to Galveston, Texas, I find a special personal meaning in being invited to share my vision of our common future.

In the surprise of being asked to speak on this occasion, before I realized that I wouldn't be speaking in the stadium, I suffered a few moments of anxiety. Of all the places I'd spoken, I couldn't recall speaking in a stadium, until I rememberd that as a member of my high school's speech and debate club I used to announce football half-times. Even though I didn't end up speaking in a stadium, the institution of half-time still strikes me as an appropriate symbol for our situation today. It is a special kind of hiatus--one of those rare occasions that forces us to think about the past and the future simultaneously and to reflect upon the connection between the two. It reminds us that even though we think we know where everyone stands, we cannot predict the outcome, that new opportunities as well as new setbacks are just around the corner, that the individual's fate is inextricably linked with the group's, and that we could always play a better game.

So let me ask you to spend a few minutes in this academic time-out that our universities make for us--thinking about the connection between past and future, between your education to date and the challenges that will test it, about the public obligations that education, particularly at a public institution, places on us.

This is also an occasion that should make us think about what it means to be educated. My own definition has always stressed the combination of humility and curiosity that I think a good education can instill: Being educated is knowing what it would take to be educated. A friend on the faculty goes even further: Being educated is knowing that you're not educated. I once heard a top administrator from Stanford say, "Education is what's left after what's

learned has been forgotten." Now I would never stand before you as a representative of the faculty and encourage you to forget what you've learned in order to be educated; but I would remind you that education is more than the acquisition and mastery of information and skills. It involves a commitment to keep developing your mind and cultivating your talents as long and as far as possible. All three of these definitions share a profound paradox that constitutes my theme today--that some of the goals most worth pursuing can never be fulfilled.

Now our society is very good at helping us to learn about questions that have already been answered or to identify those not yet answered; but the tradition of a liberal college education to which I subscribe calls us also to a concern for the questions that cannot be answered but must be addressed by each successive generation with all the resources available to them.

A famous philosopher has counseled, "Your children are born for a time different from yours. Therefore do not force them to adopt exactly the same culture in which you yourself were brought up." That advice seems so current, but it was written more than 1,000 years ago, by the Arab philosopher Hunayn, quoting Plato, a thinker whose impact on world history extends far beyond the Latin West and its heirs. I believe that your generation has been born for a different time, and I believe that you will need to draw on your education for the resources to meet three challenges:

1. You will face new and serious threats to pluralism within our own country, at a time when tolerance for diversity will become more important than ever.

2. You will be required to develop a new understanding of the significance of our nation within its world-historical context and to help our country gain a new sense of its place in an increasingly internationalized and interdependent world.

3. You will need to begin to close the enormous gap between our technological competence and our moral, spiritual, emotional, and psychological capacities, and to seek a broader understanding of the human condition and a sense of ourselves as members of the human community.

Let me turn to the question of pluralism, by which I mean an ideology that celebrates and valorizes the existence of plurality, of diversity. Ours is a country where in theory different kinds of people, in terms of religion, sex, race, creed, and national origin, are invited to form a just society organized around a certain set of social, ethical, and political ideals. We all know, when we do not allow ourselves to be complacent, where we have fallen short. It's so easy to forget that we are all immigrants here, even the Indians if anthropologists are correct, and to laugh with Charles Emerson Winchester on M.A.S.H. when he says, "Oh immigrants, my family has been having trouble with them ever since we came to this country." It's so easy to be in the business of certifying privilege already enjoyed. It's so easy to forget that racial and ethnic minorities are shamefully underrepresented in many roles and neighborhoods and statuses, that women have not come so far as we would like to believe, and that religious intolerance persists and in some areas grows.

The greatest challenges are yet to come, as more and more people from cultures hitherto not much present in the U.S. arrive, not sharing what we like to call, some would say misleadingly, the "Judeo-Christian" heritage. Will your generation, I wonder, find it easier than we to call Islam and Buddhism, among others, "American" religions? After all, if current estimates are correct, there are more Muslims in the United States than Episcopalians. Will you be able to forge a shared public ethic out of a cacophony of voices far more confusing than the one we've had to deal with? Will you be able to preserve the civil liberties of all Americans as our varied involvements in events abroad threaten to divide us?

With regard to the international dimension, your generation will also be challenged to envision our country as more deeply interwoven in the entire fabric of human history, especially now that every culture in the world is feeding into ours. You will have a chance to fulfill better than we did one of the traditional goals of the liberal college education--a full understanding of the human condition. Fifty years ago Arnold Toynbee, whom some would call the greatest world historian of the twentieth century, set an agenda we would do well to adopt today:

> In order to save humankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class, and race. In order to live together in concord successfully, we have to know each other, and knowing each other includes knowing each other's past. . . . All of human history is relevant to present and future human needs. The knowledge of the history of humankind should be one of humankind's common possessions.
>
> We shall, however, have to do more than just understand each other's cultural heritages, and more even than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and love them as being parts of humankind's common treasure and therefore being ours too, as truly as the heirlooms that we ourselves shall be contributing to the common stock.
>
> . . . it is already possible to look forward to a time when Western distortions of the true picture, and all other distortions . . . will be replaced by a new vision of the past seen from the standpoint, not of this or that nationality, civilization, or religion, but of a united human race. If humankind does respond to the challenge of its present self-imposed ordeal by saving itself from self-inflicted genocide, this will have been the reward of a common effort to transcend all the traditional divisions and to live as one family for the first time since humankind made its first appearance on this planet.

All this will mean our cultivating an ability to empathize with radically different points of view. When Richard Nixon went to China in 1972, my favorite television journalist Charles Kuralt narrated a documentary in which he explored American misunderstandings of that country. He said that when older Chinese were asked what they thought of Western civilization, they said they thought it would be a good idea.

Part of the success of the United States has in my opinion stemmed from the ability of its earliest European settlers to conceive of being in a new world, to turn west and cut themselves off from tradition, antiquity, the past. But such ahistorical thinking is a luxury now, and a self-destructive

one at that. I often tell my history students that nothing fails like success. How easily strengths become weaknesses! How many a nation or empire did so well it couldn't see the world changing until it was too late!

There is a great irony buried in all this. The United States has amassed perhaps the greatest resources in human history for understanding the various cultures in the world and their interactions, past and present, yet the level of public knowledge about the wider world remains woefully inadequate. The teachers of the next generation will have to begin the difficult task of translating university wisdom into public wisdom. After all, one of the great social assets of the university is its principle of free and open inquiry, its ability to foster critical self-consciousness and the study of all subjects, regardless of what appears at the time to be their practical value. If I and other scholars of Islam and Iran had not continued to study our subjects when we were told, twenty years ago, that they were passé, our country would be even less able to cope with the present situation than it is. It is intellectually irresponsible to study something only because it is topical; but it is morally irresponsible not to draw out the public significance of a topic after it has been studied for its own inherent worth.

Finally, your generation will have to struggle to surround our immense technological achievements with the human wisdom that can make them worthwhile and constructive. This will mean bringing our drive for individual personal gratification under control, finding new ways to reflect on and resolve the age-old, inherent human tension between satisfying personal desires and serving, often at our own expense, the many communities to which each of us belongs. It will mean discovering earlier than I did the satisfaction of contributing to projects we know we won't see through to their conclusion, realizing that the only things you can take with you are the ones you leave behind. It will mean learning to pursue intangible rewards in a society in which material success is much more accessible and valued.

In this regard, one major demographic change should be kept in mind. In terms of the history of the planet, human history is a blip on the screen, yet it is humans who have made themselves capable of destroying a material world in which they have been present such a short time. Until your generation, when we reminded ourselves always to remember that the absent are present, we thought we could say that the living were in the minority. However, it now appears that your generation may be the first for whom a study of history will become a study of the minority. There may be more people alive now than have ever lived and died. Thus the already unreasonable degree to which humans can affect a planet so much older than they will be greatly accentuated.

As you can by now see, I believe that we have set admirable goals for our educational system and for our society at large. No, we have not reached them, but that in my view should be cause for hope and not despair, since I believe in the value of pursuing goals that we know cannot ever be fulfilled. On behalf of all my colleagues at Ohio State, especially in the History department and in Center for Comparative Studies in the Humanities and the College of Humanities itself; on behalf of all of my teachers (especially my high school speech coach); and on behalf of my own family, which includes a student at Ohio State, I thank you for your attention and wish you well, and ask that you remember my theme--the importance of unreachable goals--at a time in your lives when it is particularly easy to forget. A famous poet said it much better than I, if you will allow me to paraphrase his wisdom in a manner more befitting our newer consciousness: "One's reach should always exceed one's grasp, else what is heaven for." Thank you very much.